

## THE STAGING OF THE RECOGNITION SCENE IN THE *CHOEPHOROI*

The appearance of two new editions of the *Choephoroi* in 1986 has prompted me to reexamine the theatrical logic of the recognition scene. Anthony Bowen's student edition (Bristol, 1986) offers a curious contrast. Bowen is alert to the music of the choruses, and describes them as 'a feast in themselves' (p. 43). He remarks with reference to the strophic verse that 'it is surprising how well these works have come down to us' (p. 41). When he discusses the staging, however, he no longer finds the text well preserved, and follows Fraenkel in disposing of the footprints. Three interpolations, a total of nine lines, have to be struck out (pp. 177–81). A. F. Garvie's scholarly edition (Oxford, 1986) broadly accepts the extant text, but does not – I wish to argue – yet grasp the theatrical logic of the writing.

The starting point for an analysis of the staging must be to identify two locations, the tomb and the hiding place. Let us begin with the tomb. Various theories have been floated. All the references are given by Garvie, so I shall not reproduce them here. The idea that the tomb is constructed on a permanent outcrop of rock intruding upon the orchestra is rightly rejected by Garvie because this would mean that the focus of the entire first half of the play is on the periphery of the acting area (p. xliv). The idea that a temporary construction was set up in view of the audience in the interval between *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi*, and removed in the next interval, seems clumsy. More seriously, a special structure set up in the orchestra would impede the choreography, and break up the symmetrical patterning of strophe and antistrophe. To erect a structure on the stage adjacent to the *skēnē* is no better, because this breaks down the necessary distance between tomb and palace, and makes the move from the one space to the next half way through the play impossible to render visually.

Peter Arnott offers the sensible observation that the chorus identify the 'tomb' so often to the audience because the object in question is not obviously a tomb, and he suggests that the permanent stage altar in front of the central doors does duty as the tomb.<sup>1</sup> There is much to be said for equating the tomb with an altar, and for assuming that the audience had to use some imagination. In the *Thesmophoriazousai*, a play much concerned with theatrical artifice, Aristophanes comments on the convention whereby the tomb of Proteus at which Helen sits is denoted by an altar (τολμᾶς σῆμα τὸν βωμὸν καλεῖν – *Thes.* 888). We should not expect Aeschylus in the *Oresteia* to be more of a scenic realist than Euripides in *Helen*. It is interesting that Aeschylus' chorus promise ambiguously to honour βωμὸν ὡς τύμβον (*Cho.* 106) – 'the tomb as though it were an altar', or, in the more obvious word order 'the altar as if it were a tomb'. Iconographic evidence confirms that the tomb should resemble an altar. A crater in Basle which shows a pre-Aeschylean tragic hemi-chorus dancing before a tomb, represents the tomb as an altar set on a stepped podium.<sup>2</sup> Numerous fifth-century reliefs and fourth-century vases represent the recognition scene of Orestes and Electra as taking place beside a *stēlē*, usually square, set on a stepped podium.<sup>3</sup> It is not beyond an audience's imagination to translate a *stēlē* into an altar.

<sup>1</sup> P. D. Arnott, *Greek Scenic Conventions* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 59–61.

<sup>2</sup> See Erika Simon, *The Ancient Theatre*, tr. C. E. Vafopoulou-Richardson (London, 1982), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> See A. D. Trendall and T. B. L. Webster, *Illustrations of Greek Drama* (London, 1971), fig. III.1.1–6; A. J. N. W. Prag, *The Oresteia: Iconographic and Narrative Tradition* (Warminster, 1985), plates 34–6.

Arnott is forced to conclude that the altar in front of the doorway serves as tomb because of his *a priori* commitment to the idea that fifth-century actors performed on a stage. The weakness of his thesis is obvious. Not only does the staging which he advocates destroy the necessary distance between the tomb and palace, it also destroys focus, for the chorus cannot dance round such a tomb. They can only dance in the orchestra. The *kommos* in which Agamemnon's spirit is evoked requires, as Garvie rightly observes (p. xlv), that actors and chorus are interlocked within a single grouping. The obvious answer is to use the *thymelē* in the centre of the orchestra – as Sidgwick assumed in his edition of the play over a century ago.<sup>4</sup>

This position may help to suggest the circularity of a Mycenaean grave mound. More importantly, it allows maximum freedom to the choreographer when, as Orestes and Electra keen for their father and the chorus for their king, Agamemnon is addressed within his burial place. On a symbolic level, the beaten earth of the dancing floor is more appropriate than a wooden platform as the location for the tomb. The libations borne by the chorus need to be poured into the earth. Earth is also subsequently required for the discovery of footprints.

Garvie resists the idea of using the orchestral *thymelē* on the strength of Pickard-Cambridge's *ex cathedra* statement that the *thymelē* 'belonged to the festival, not to the play'.<sup>5</sup> The idea that the *thymelē* is somehow ignored by the performers is an extraordinary one. In the Elizabethan theatre, stage posts were needed to support the canopy. Actors were normally content for the audience to ignore these features, but whenever convenient the posts could be enlisted in the action – as, for instance, trees in the Forest of Arden. Much the same flexibility must have governed the use of Greek statues and altars. It is hard to conceive that when the chorus of *Agamemnon* danced out the death of Iphigeneia, they did not use the altar in the orchestra to focus the imaginations of the audience upon the altar at Aulis. Indeed, Pickard-Cambridge hints that he would concede this much. If the *thymelē* has been established as the scene of Iphigeneia's death, then there is a strong dramatic gain if in the second play of the trilogy the same spot can mark the place where Iphigeneia's father and killer lies. While Agamemnon is being adulated by two of his children, the staging reminds the audience of the unspoken fate which befell the third. It is of course perfectly possible that there was no permanent *thymelē* in Aeschylus' day, in which case Pickard-Cambridge's argument would fall.<sup>6</sup> My own argument here assumes only that an altar stands in the centre of the orchestra for the duration of the trilogy.

Garvie notes correctly that the *thymelē* would be too small to serve as a hiding place (p. xliii n. 100). The obvious solution is that of Taplin, namely that Orestes and Pylades retreat 'out of the way' (ἐκποδών) to the doorway of the *skēnē*, a structure which is still associated with the palace but not yet identified as such by the text.<sup>7</sup> The orchestra offers no convenient hiding place. A commedia dell'arte actor could have held up a cloak over the lower half of his face to signify concealment, but there is no Greek evidence for such a convention. The north-facing *skēnē* threw a shadow which would suggest the idea that those within the shadow were concealed.

Physical distance between tomb and hiding place makes the recognition scene easier to play. Electra follows the footprints with her gaze fixed to the ground, while

<sup>4</sup> Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* (Oxford, 1884), p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Theatre of Dionysus in Athens* (Oxford, 1946), p. 131.

<sup>6</sup> There is no firm archaeological evidence. A pre-Aeschylean dithyramb by Pratinas (Athenaeus 617c), perhaps incorporated in a satyr play, seems to allude to the flautist positioned on the *thymelē* of Dionysus.

<sup>7</sup> Oliver Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 335–6.

Orestes sees what she is doing and emerges to startle her. Garvie is unhappy with Taplin's staging because 'after the use made of the door in *Agamemnon*, it would be confusing if it were used here for this quite different purpose' (p. xlv). But this confusion, it seems to me, is precisely Aeschylus' purpose. The staging creates a visual echo of the momentous crossings of the orchestra when Agamemnon and Cassandra walked into the shadows of the *skēnē* to their deaths. Agamemnon walked in, but his son walks out. Electra, like Cassandra, is halted by an apparition. The parallelism of father and son is marked visually by the fact that both go barefoot. Agamemnon removed his buskins to walk across the red tapestry like a wine treader treading red grapes. Electra's precise description of the prints makes it clear that Orestes too is barefoot. He may well have removed his shoes during the lost prologue. Orestes comes not as a triumphant warrior but as an ephebe with the minimum of accoutrements. Agamemnon stepped from his chariot onto tapestries, and was prevented from ever laying his feet on the soil of Argos (μή χαμαὶ τιθεῖς | τὸν σὸν πόδ', *Ag.* 906–7). Orestes' first action is to make physical contact with 'this earth' (γῆν τήνδε) at the foot of the 'mounded' (ἐπ' ὄχθῳ) tomb (*Cho.* 3–4). In contrast to Agamemnon's hybris, Orestes bares his feet in a conventional act of piety.<sup>8</sup> If Orestes goes barefoot to the altar while Pylades continues to wear the shoes proper to one who is making a journey, then we can see an immediate logic behind Electra's observation that one set of prints belongs to the giver of the hair while the other belongs to a fellow traveller (208).

There is force to Electra's confusion about Orestes' identity, for in a sense he is not himself but his father reincarnated. He may also have been established here as the agent of Apollo. The obvious place for Orestes to hide in the vicinity of the doorway is behind the obelisk<sup>9</sup> of Apollo Agyieus. This obelisk was evidently the focus for Cassandra's vision of Apollo which halted her as she approached the doors. If this speculation is correct, and Electra sees a man where Cassandra imagined an apparition of Apollo, then a further point can be made in the *Eumenides*. Orestes in the third play clings not to the primitive obelisk of Apollo but to the civilized representational statue of Athene – for only she can protect him. This scene of the *Eumenides* sets up more visual reminders. Another woman seeks Orestes, failing to see her quarry because she is crouched over his tracks: Electra has turned Fury. Hunted by the chorus, Orestes becomes the beast that his emblematic woven garment declared him to be. The use of such mirror scenes is plainly a compositional feature of the dramaturgy – no less basic to Aeschylus' art than the self-mirroring structure of the strophic dances.

One further detail from the scene is worth noting, to illustrate Aeschylus' complete control over the play as a visual representation. The actor playing Electra has to make the audience think they see a lock of hair which is too small for them actually to make out with their eyes. The actor's art lies in holding the hair in such a way that the lock

<sup>8</sup> The Greeks normally wore shoes in the street but removed them for worship. See K. D. Morrow, *Greek Footwear and the Dating of Sculpture* (Madison, 1985), p. xxiii.

<sup>9</sup> There is some uncertainty about the relationship between the *agyieus bōmos* (altar) and the *agyias*. The former, according to Pollux 4. 123, stands in front of the central door on stage. The latter was normally conical or tapered in shape. Harpocration and Hesychius nevertheless describe it as a type of *bōmos*. I presume that the conical stone vanished from the Hellenistic theatre, and a regular altar was substituted for it. See A. C. Pearson's note on Sophocles, fr. 370 in *The Fragments of Sophocles*, ii (Cambridge, 1917). Aeschylus used a *bretas* or 'wooden statue' of Apollo in *Seven Against Thebes* and *Suppliants*, but these statues are part of a group gathered at a common altar (*Suppl.* 222). Aeschylus' use of the *skēnē* was innovative in the *Oresteia*, and he seems to have introduced the *agyias* to complement the now prominent doorway.

may be imagined. As Fraenkel understood, the hair has to be used, not just held.<sup>10</sup> Electra debates whether to throw the hair away, or keep it to adorn the tomb. Plainly she puts the matter to the test at *Cho.* 200, throwing the hair from her to see where it lands, trusting that the gods will know the truth (201). Her first metaphor refers to herself being whirled as in a storm (202–3) – momentarily actor and hair become one. Electra must be crouched to the ground picking up the lock in time for her second metaphor, which refers to a small seed taking root (203–4). It is because the actor has his eyes fixed onto the ground that Electra is able to notice and identify the footprints. Line by line, the dramatist has thought through the physical requirements of performance. As Anthony Bowen remarks, ‘it is surprising how well these works have come down to us’.

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Hugh Lloyd-Jones in ‘Some Alleged Interpolations in *Choephoroi* and *Electra*’, *CQ* 11 (1961), 175.